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# Well Versed in the Art of Work : How Poetry Can Help Us Make Sense of Nonsense

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## **Well Versed in the Art of Work: How Poetry Can Help Us Make Sense of Nonsense**

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*A poem records emotions and moods that lie beyond normal language that  
can only be patched together and hinted at metaphorically.*

W. H. Auden

The forces driving human behaviour in the workplace often remain below the surface, not explored or discussed. Day to day activity comprises people seeking (or seeking to be seen) to conform to espoused rules, values and performance requirements, while at the same time exhibiting resistance, anger, disruptive and damaging behaviours. How easy is it for us to articulate our feelings of resentment, disempowerment, vulnerability, boredom, disinterest etc. in a situation where we need to “be good”? Is there existing poetry shining a light on the darker side of working life? If so is it being used as data? Could poetry be self-help for workers and for organisations?

This paper explores, in poetry form, the role of poetry in making sense of the “darker” side of organisational life. Given the smorgasbord of existing perspectives on what makes organisations “tick” the poem presents one experience of organisational life while drawing on academic literature spanning some 30+ years.

The poem then provides an argument, supported by reference to literature, for the use of poetry to make sense of organisational complexity, to give people a voice and to develop a deeper understanding of what really drives organisational behaviours and subsequently affects organisational outcomes.

Please note that it has not been possible to follow protocol with regard to referencing, for the sake of the poem. A complete list of references is provided at the end.

### Making Sense of Nonsense

This workplace confuses us, day after day  
 The people here do and say things in a way  
 That has nothing to do with the strategic goals  
 Or the statement of values or even their roles.  
 We all do the same, it's the rule here, I guess  
 But we don't know who wrote it or who to address  
 To find out what the game is – the real one, we mean  
 Not the ones in the boxes we've already seen  
 With the company name on them, board games with rules  
 Snakes and Ladders, Monopoly, Risk (for the fools)  
 Not the games we're not playing here – the other game  
 Where the rules are not written and don't stay the same  
 Where the dice have no numbers, there's no way to score  
 And the people who win seem to start with much more  
 In the first place. Where "cheating" cannot be defined  
 And where every move made here can be undermined  
 By a counter-move, chess-like, to take out the Knight  
 What's the name of the game please? If we knew it we might  
 Feel less vulnerable, anxious, resentful and scared  
 If we all had the rule book we'd be more prepared.

On exploring the "toxic" stuff in all the books,  
 Likened by **Frost** to cancer, and how climate looks  
 To writers like **Furnham**, "the weather" he says  
 (It is raining on this floor, but sunshine upstairs)  
 In defence of our reasoning, we're making sense  
 Of a meaningless workplace – **Argyris** and **Rench**  
 And **Karl Albrecht** all get it, don't know what to do  
 We're avoiding all action – **Block** said we would, too  
 We've learned that we're helpless, nothing we can do  
 To avoid the next shocks, some more pain, we are strapped  
 Down like dogs in our cages, we're all of us trapped  
 Just as **Seligman** told us, we all are agreed  
 That to fight it is pointless, but somehow we need  
 To make sense of this nonsense, to find a way through  
 Truth to power's not an option (it's dangerous too)  
 Vital lies are the spoken words, **Goleman** asserts  
 Simple truths are too dangerous, someone gets hurt.

And which words should we use to sound rational when  
 All around us is nonsense, confusion, again.  
 Is there any way we can articulate stuff  
 That we don't understand – are our feelings enough  
 To provide us with data, EQ and SQ?  
 To help us to navigate, find a way through  
**Zohar**, **Goleman** and **Armstrong** see meaning as key  
 And no strategy documents do it for me.  
 I know about change curves from **Bridges** et al  
 I've studied addiction, from **Schaefer** and **Fassel**  
 There's mileage in group think – **Janis**, we agree  
 That it's hopeless, we're helpless, and that we can't see  
 In the dark of the dark side, can't find our way through  
 The locked doors in the corridors, words so untrue  
 In the shadows of power, wherever it sits  
**Foucault** says it's pervasive, just must have my wits

About me to wield it, to compete and win  
 Take out distant authority (**Hirschhorn**) –begin  
 To identify what it is driving this place  
 To make sense of the madness, step back from the race.

So see with new eyes, discover again  
 The same thing but differently, then only then  
**Proust** suggests we will see some things for the first time  
 In a world where there's absence of reason or rhyme  
 In a life which can feel like a runaway train  
 Where no changes affect it, a loss then a gain  
 Where the passengers change, getting off, getting on  
 And the train barrels on, destination unknown  
 (**Ben Folds** sings of change in the workplace) and so  
 As this is how it is I will give it a go.  
 While power corrupts, can I cleanse with my verse?  
 Just as **Eliot** says I will speak of diverse  
 Ways of being and seeing and feeling and quote  
**Robert Frost** who says verse will take life by the throat  
 Because here we can move beyond all the confines  
 Of reality (**Strati**) and find in the lines  
 Something new, something real, something not wrong or right  
 But some truth about culture, affect and the plight  
 Of the worker who struggles to join up the dots  
 To explain the encounter (**Akhtar**), the subplots  
 The gaps in the script, the white on the page  
 The smiles and the nods, but the feelings of rage  
 As we sit in the meetings, we mark with a pen  
 Something meaningless, inconsequential again.

We meet targets, tick boxes, but work's never done  
 Something new here to do, like at **Matthew and Son**  
 Five days of the week we make nothing much change  
 For forty plus hours we will rearrange  
 We'll say words we must say, play the part we must play  
 Acquiesce, compromise, more for less, win the prize  
 For the service, the smiles, the superfluous lies  
 Emotional labour, so pretty, so nice  
 Aesthetically pleasing, don't look at the eyes  
 At the edges you'll see there is rage and despair  
 (**Fraiberg**) as we focus on those places where  
 There is life, there is love, there is pain and there's hope  
 Where stuff happens that hurts and we struggle to cope  
 Where relationships start and relationships end  
 And we witness the death of a loved one or friend  
 Where our hearts play a part, where the truth can be told  
 Where we sing, where we cry, where our actions are bold  
 No, not here, in this meeting, where gods have all left,  
 (**Ayot**) where we doodle, and we are bereft  
 We are stark, we're alone, we are trapped in this game  
 The socially structured game with no name.  
 Economic, material, to have not to be  
 (**Erich Fromm**) have no fear, we will never be free  
 We all know it, an ugly lifelong compromise  
 Where parenting us comes in heavy disguise  
 As appraisal (the accent on "praise" so they say)  
 And we smile, and we hate it, and wish it away

And we know in our souls that we could have been more  
 Than an attendant lord, a name on the door  
 To swell a progress, to be of some use  
 Lying and trying to dodge the abuse  
**(Eliot, Mitchell)** our ragged claws  
 Scuttling up the thirty three floors  
 Presenting ourselves as actors might do  
 In our everyday lives, as they want us to  
**(Erving Goffman)** the script has the words we should speak  
 But the plot is unclear and the casting is weak  
 And the space between lines tells us more than the words  
 Some **Pinter**-esque, **Godot**-like theatre absurd

And the metaphors used to make sense of the mess  
 Are poetic, creative, dynamic, and less  
 About logic and facts and the way it should be  
 And much more about feelings, immediacy  
*"It's like Alice in Wonderland playing croquet"*  
*"I plait tape for a living, every day"*  
*"It's a Stepford wives organisation I see"*  
*"It is violent, abusive, it damages me"*  
*"I am building a building but I don't know what"*  
*Kind of building they wanted, I've lost the plot"*  
*"There's a critical mass of the status-quoers"*  
*Who ensure nothing changes and nothing occurs"*  
**(Knight)** so on and so forth using language that soars  
 Above logic because it unlocks the locked doors  
 The researcher will hear and discover, through art,  
 New landscapes, new meanings (**Proust, Darmer**) and start  
 To see depth, to see truth to feel mood and to see  
 That this everyday poetry provides the key  
 And the songs and the poems already out there  
 By the famous and talented, people who care,  
 Will confirm the validity of what we try  
 To express, when confused, hoping to simplify  
 But we learn quite the opposite, that we can't find  
 Superficial solutions, when we use our minds  
**(Weick)** assumptions are dangerous, life is a mess  
 As is "organization", much of it's a guess

What the poet can do, then, is switch on the light  
 In the dark, to illuminate paths that we might  
 Take or not take, depending on what we think best  
**(James)** No route maps or answers then, all of it guessed  
 By the great and the good and the lowly and bad  
 By the bosses, the workers, the mums and the dads  
 By the children whose hands are held but still they guess  
 Who is right, who is wrong, what is more, what is less  
 And the music goes back to the start of the song  
**(Del Amitri)** and we feel we must sing along  
 Sing the words we don't know to the tune no-one wrote  
 But we'll find words to sing and we'll make up the notes  
 In the light which shows darkness and nothing to see  
 Where the words we have written allow us to be  
 More at ease with the chaos, the nonsense, the game  
 With no rules that we're playing; we all do the same  
 Most times we read out the instructions so well

That we'd almost believe we have something to tell  
 But the poet says "no", just switch on the light  
 And you'll see there is nothing to see, it's alright  
 Because that is the simple truth – no vital lies  
**James and Weick** said it for me; to know this is wise  
 It's only confusing if we think our song  
 Is a song we don't make up as we go along.

This workplace is beautiful, every day  
 The people here do and say things in a way  
 That has nothing to do with the strategic goals  
 Or the statement of values or even their roles  
 They are artists and poets and tellers of tales  
 They make and break patterns and go off the rails  
 As the train barrels on to the place with no name  
 They find wonder in laughter, they play their own game  
 They pretend when they have to, they do what they should  
 They're as naughty and playful as they can be good  
 There's no yellow brick road we can follow because  
 There isn't a wise one – no Wizard of Oz  
 They're only pretending as well, like we do  
 All the anguish is gone when we know this is true.  
 Paradox, ambiguity, chaos and change  
 Unpredictable lives where we must re-arrange  
 We are children in grown-ups clothes, suits and high heels  
 We make up the rules randomly, see how it feels  
 But we're good at pretending – we've done it for years  
 It's just when we believe it it all ends in tears  
 So the person you thought knew the rules of the game  
 Doesn't know any more than you. They're just the same.

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Dr Jenny Knight is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Business at the University of Brighton in the UK. Jenny has a background in writing, directing and acting for the theatre and a lifelong passion for poetry, having been writing and reading it since her childhood. Jenny incorporates her love of the arts and all things creative into her teaching and her research and has won a teaching excellence award for the use of her own verse to help students get to grips with what makes organisations "tick". Her focus is on the "dark side" of organisational life, and her belief is that both poetic language and performance are ways of bringing the subject to life and focusing on our complex emotional relationship with our workplace. Jenny's PhD study was entitled *The Unresourceful Organisation: The Persistence of "Group Helplessness" in the Workplace*.